
A Guide to



Quality

in

Financial Aid Management

PART

Making Verification Count

I

***Using the Quality Analysis (verification) Tool
to Understand the Impact of Verification***

<http://qaprogram.air.org/qatool.asp>

Additional Segments To Come:

II

Accountability and Integrity

***Conducting Self-Monitoring Activities with
the SFA Assessments***

<http://qaprogram.air.org/SFAAssessment.asp>

III

Innovation

***With the Experimental Sites Program and
Effective Practices***

<http://qaprogram.air.org/SiteReport.asp>

March 2002

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DRAFT

Verification

The technical and administrative procedures for detecting and resolving inaccuracies in the data a student (and family) supplied on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid.

For more information, please see the SFA Handbook at:
<http://ifap.ed.gov/sfahandbooks/attachments/0102AVGCh3wkverif.pdf>

A Dozen Benefits

The Quality Analysis (verification) Tool can help you to:

1. **Query** any data element listed on the ISIR
2. **Review** different types of filers by year in school or tax type
3. **Select** subgroups of populations you think warrant verification
4. **Educate** your students up front about common errors
5. **Update** information for your High School/College Nights
6. **Refresh** your Web site, verification material and publications
7. **Determine** if the Expected Family Contribution (EFC) changed as a result of the verification performed
8. **Target** student errors and reduce unnecessary requests and data entries
9. **Understand** which groups experience changes in EFC and Pell eligibility as a result of collecting tax returns
10. **Learn** which groups are eligible for more aid – and which are receiving more aid than they should
11. **Identify** students who would have received more aid had they completed the form accurately
12. **Discover and recommend** data elements for addition to the Department's verification edits

*Produced by Student Financial Assistance
Performance Improvement and Procedures Division
U.S. Department of Education*

Introduction

The purpose of this guide is to help all Title IV-eligible schools to access, understand and use the variety of tools and programs that exist to help them administer student aid.

We provide links to these resources, which center on verifying the accuracy of student aid awards, improving campus verification practices through data analysis, and enhancing management effectiveness.

There are seven sections to the Guide:

- ▶ ***1 – Overview, with FAQs***
- ▶ ***2 – Using Version 2.0 of the Quality Analysis (verification) Tool***
 - The Installation Guide
 - The Desk Reference
 - The “Help” Text Featured in the Software
- ▶ ***3 – Some Pointers on Data Analysis***
- ▶ ***4 – How the Quality Assurance (QA) Schools Use the Tools***
- ▶ ***5 – Briefing and Training Materials***
- ▶ ***6 – Announcements on Key Topics***
- ▶ ***7 – Web Links of Note***

1 -- Overview

Since the mid 1980s, Student Financial Assistance (SFA) staff have been working in collaboration with postsecondary institutions to meet the goals of **increasing the accuracy of student aid awards** and **minimizing the burden** that verification practices place on schools and students.

Thanks to advances in technology, these efforts have been transformed in recent months, as the Department staff has tested, revised, and issued Version 2.0 of its new Quality Analysis (verification) Tool, which is available now for use by all Title IV-eligible schools as they conduct institutional verification analysis.

A central point that school staff have impressed upon us – and reinforced during many conferences, focus groups, and other meetings – is that **schools are very concerned about using limited staff time well.**

In response, Version 2.0 of the Tool is designed to help schools analyze campus verification practices with the same data files used in aid processing.¹

The Tool has many benefits. It is designed so a school can import ISIR records into the software, run reports tailored to its campus practices, and design queries that yield desired information that is useful for decision making. Guidance on how to construct these queries is available online at <http://qaprogram.air.org/ToolForSchool.asp>.

For additional information about the reports that the Tool will generate for you, please see Table 1 on pp. 15-16 of this Guide.

¹ The shorthand term we use for the Quality Analysis (verification) Tool is “the Tool.”

The Tool can help a financial aid office:

- **Evaluate changes in ISIR data stemming from verification**
- **Determine where changes have an impact on the Expected Family Contribution (EFC)**
- **Determine where verification failed to change EFC**
- **Produce reports that explore the implications that changes in practice may hold for improving a verification program.**

The Tool runs on the Windows 98, Windows NT, Windows 2000, and Windows ME PC operating systems and can be installed on a stand alone or a networked environment. The Department of Education has a main page for downloading software at <http://SFAdownload.ed.gov>; technical support also is available by calling 1-800-330-5947 or via e-mail at CPSWAN@NCS.com. Additional Web-based resources include:

The SFA Handbook chapter on verification:
<http://ifap.ed.gov/sfahandbooks/attachments/0102AVGCh3wkverif.pdf>

Details on using the Tool are in its Desk Reference, which can be downloaded from
<http://sfadownload.ed.gov/softqat0203.htm>

The following "Frequently Asked Questions" cover several matters of general interest concerning the Tool. The remainder of this Guide describes procedures for using the software – and resources concerning how to get started, import ISIR records, and understand and use the reports that are the Tool's most important innovation.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the starting point for a school financial aid office that seeks to make optimum use of the new Quality Analysis (verification) Tool?

Begin by collecting and maintaining FAFSA data in a format (ISIR records or EDEExpress) that can be imported into the Tool. Updated guidance will be presented online at <http://qaprogram.air.org/ToolForSchool.asp>.

What might financial aid office staff do to become familiar with the Tool and run the software?

Read this guide! In particular, see Section 2 on using the tool and Section 3 for pointers on data analysis. Equally important, be in touch with your colleagues in financial aid offices on other campuses to compare notes.

What is being done to ensure ongoing improvement of the Tool?

A pilot study is under way, designed to:

- ✓ determine if sampling of *applicants* rather than recipients is feasible at various types of institutions;
- ✓ check the capacity of the Tool to capture institutional verification procedures; and
- ✓ demonstrate the additional analytic capacity of the Tool software with documented values.

Is there a Web-based source for the latest guidance concerning use of the Tool?

The Tools for Schools page on the Quality Assurance Web Site provides links to the latest guidance, including a new step-by-step manual on how to construct queries using the Tool. It's online at: <http://qaprogram.air.org/ToolForSchool.asp>.

How can I reach someone to discuss using the Tool?

For technical assistance on installing and running the software, please call 1-800-330-5947 or e-mail the technical support staff at at CPSWAN@NCS.com.

Staff members at the participating Quality Assurance schools are invited to contact their regional program analysts, by region:

Regions 1, 2, and 5

Program Analyst: **Holly Langer-Evans**
[Holly.Langer-Evans@ed.gov]
Phone: 617-223-9603

Regions 3, 4, 6, and 7

Program Analyst: **Francine Reeves**
[Francine.Reeves@ed.gov]
Phone: 404-562-6289

Regions 8, 9, and 10:

Program Analyst: **Michael Cagle**
[Michael.Cagle@ed.gov]
Phone: 206-615-2586

2 – Using Version 2.0 of the Quality Analysis (verification) Tool

The Installation Guide

Available online as a downloadable PDF file [at <http://sfadownload.ed.gov/softqat0203.htm>] the Installation Guide is a 34-page description of the software's system requirements and instructions for both single-user and network installation.

On one level, the Installation Guide offers necessary background information about technical matters such as LAN server compatibility. But on another level, the installation guide illustrates how easy it is to set up and use the Tool.

Once the setup steps are complete, users can import and validate data.

The Tool is designed so that school users can select verification edit profiles that locate the student records matching your school's verification criteria – and then flag those records for verification.

This can help you to more accurately:

- **identify changes as a result of verification that occur at your school**
- **identify and use verification practices that make a difference in aid awards**
- **identify and eliminate time-consuming practices that make little or no difference in final awards.**

The Installation Guide also previews the steps required for analyzing data, which are described in *Section 3 – Some Pointers on Data Analysis*, on page 11 of this guide.

The Desk Reference

Augmenting the Installation Guide, the Desk Reference drills down into the procedures required to use the software after it is installed. It also is available for download in PDF format at <https://www.sfadownload.ed.gov/repository/qat0203v20/QAToolDeskRef.pdf>.

The Desk Reference is designed to provide specifics, as for example, in delineating the three types of data that can be imported with the tool:

- **ISIR Data in ASCII Format, for those who did not use the 2002-2003 EExpress for Windows**
- **The 2002-2003 EExpress Database, for those who use EExpress for Windows and thus can import ISIR data directly from that database and construct special queries to use for importing**
- **User Defined Data saved in a separate ASCII file according to the user data record layout**

The Desk Reference also provides helpful details on analyzing data, including the comparison of the student's Initial and Paid On transactions in light of demographic data and the setting, resetting, and removal of verification flags for specified records in the database.

The Desk Reference also describes the Tool's 15 reports, including a Custom report you can design for your own needs and a Query Management Report listing both the queries you have created and the predefined queries provided by the software.

In its "Bits and Bytes" section, the Desk Reference contains step-by-step instructions for building these queries, which are the heart of the Tool's analytic power.

The “Help” Text Featured in the Software

As a logical – and quite detailed – extension of the Installation Guide and Desk Reference, the online “Help” text available within the Tool software is designed to help users with the myriad bumps in the road that one encounters when running a computer program.

Judging from the feedback we have received from school financial aid office staff who have tested the Tool, it is fair to say that computer use is a matter of preference and habit; many people are quite comfortable using the Help function by reading from the screen, while others opt to download and read the Desk Reference.

Users’ – and our own – experiences with the Tool and its “Help” text suggest these points to keep in mind as you gain proficiency:

- **The Desk Reference contains all of the common steps for using the software**
- **The “Help” text will probably be most useful to you when you seek to refresh your memory on specific options and features**
- **While the Installation Guide, Desk Reference, and Help Text all are useful resources for addressing (and, indeed, for *phrasing*) the questions you may have about running the software, it often happens that users are the first to become aware of problems to be fixed in subsequent software versions. If you believe you have identified such a need for revision, please call our technical support center at 1-800-330-5947. And thanks!**

3 – Some Pointers on Data Analysis

Once you have downloaded and installed the software, you will be in a position to use live data to guide you in designing an effective verification profile for the future. The Tool can support your efforts by telling you *who your verification profile is succeeding with* – and *who you are needlessly pestering*.

By analyzing the data from the Tool’s analytic reports (described in the table on pages 15-16), you will be able to use information about *changes that matter* to improve your verification procedures.

Most analysis performed with the Tool will focus on a specific sub-population. Queries are used to focus the analysis on only the relevant cases. For example, when examining misreports of parental income, it would only be appropriate to analyze dependent students. **A query is a request for certain records in the database.** It employs a set of criteria that describes a particular student population and is used in the Tool to select specific groups of student records from all the records in the database. Some queries – signified by the term “Predefined Query” in the upper right corner of the Query box – have fixed values; users can create their own queries to ensure that the precise sub-group of students they wish to focus on is exclusively included in reports.

Use of the Tool This Year

Version 2.0 of the Tool will allow any schools to analyze changes to ISIR information that occur during the 2002-03 academic year – as soon as you have completed aid packaging. This will greatly speed up the application of what you learn from data analysis to make improvements in your verification process.

Schools are not being asked to draw a random sample during the 2002-03 award year. Instead, schools will be using the Tool to analyze changes that occur to ISIR information during the normal application, packaging, verifying, and awarding process. It is important to keep in mind, however, that without a sample, you will not know the accuracy of non-verified, "paid on" values. In other words, you will not know if you are overlooking or "missing" an error-prone population.

Strategies for Streamlining

Even though they will not have sample data, schools will nonetheless be able to analyze patterns to the changes in ISIR information resulting from verification and/or other sources and identify the types of aid applicants (if any) that their verification process currently "pester." The focus here will be on the types of students that a school or the Department/Central Processing System currently is selecting for verification but are unlikely to experience changes to EFC or Pell Awards.

As schools use this information to decide how they might streamline their procedures, the Tool also will be able to help forecast the impact of any proposed streamlining in terms of potentially "missing" the applicants you are currently verifying who do have changes to EFC or Pell Awards.

Schools also will be able to examine changes made to FAFSA information and identify the types of students who are most likely to make changes that increase or decrease their eligibility for Title IV aid. This analysis could provide hints as to whom your verification process may be "missing" or identify types of applicants who should perhaps be excluded from verification due to high rates of "self-correction."

Local Discretion on Timing

As the Tool analyzes changes in ISIR information, schools will have to wait in order to allow time for subsequent changes to be reflected in the ISIR records received from the CPS. During the Spring and Summer of 2002, schools will focus mainly on gathering and maintaining the ISIR information they wish to analyze next fall after the initial disbursements of aid. Depending upon its schedule for processing aid applications, a school may be able to begin analysis in the Spring or Summer – whenever the ISIR records in question reasonably resemble their final form.

Schools should collect information capable of addressing the questions *you want answered by your analysis*. Maintaining data from all your applicants will provide the most flexibility in terms of what you are able to analyze later on. Schools have the option of requesting a year-to-date file from the central processor after their disbursement of aid in the Fall, to help ensure that they import the correct “paid on” transactions into the Tool for analysis. However, if you are concentrating this year’s analysis on a subset of your student body, it is perfectly fine to only collect and maintain the appropriate subset of ISIR records. (Updated guidance on ISIR data will be posted on the Web at <http://qaprogram.air.org/ToolForSchool.asp>.)

For example, first-year students, returning students, independent students with dependents other than a spouse, or other specific subsets of applicants might warrant a concentrated analysis effort. You might also want to consider only the applicants you currently select for verification and further limit this verification focus to a specific component of your verification profile. You might point your analysis toward cases that meet one condition of your verification criteria, such as

estimated tax filers, unusually high taxes in light of income level, etc.

As a general rule of thumb, you will need at least 300 cases in your database to support useful analysis (the actual number depends on what data element(s) you wish to analyze and the magnitude of the differences you want to detect between groups).

Another general rule is that the more cases you have, the more detailed your analysis can be. Remember you do not need to do anything special with the cases you will be using in the new Tool other than maintain their ISIR information in a format that can be read by the software (ISIR files or EDEExpress). This said, large schools may want to limit their analysis to no more than a few thousand randomly sampled cases in order to reduce the time it takes for the software to generate reports. *Report processing time is the only downside to having too many cases.*

Descriptions of Reports

Table 1 presents a capsule description of the **analytic reports** available in Version 2.0 of the Quality Analysis (verification) Tool. These reports grow out of the need among schools to conduct verification practices that efficiently produce information and help financial aid office staff improve the accuracy of student aid awards.

Updates providing additional guidance on how to interpret the data from these reports will be provided at the Tools for Schools page online at <http://qaprogram.air.org/ToolForSchool.asp>.

TABLE 1		Analytic Reports
<u>Report Title</u>	<u>Information</u>	<u>Relevance</u>
Field Change Report with Corrected Field Counts	Counts of records with changes to specific FAFSA fields; describes the impact of those changes on EFC	Identifies the most problematic FAFSA elements schoolwide or within a specific subpopulation
Corrected Records in Initial EFC Range	Counts of records with changes to specific FAFSA fields; describes impact of those changes upon EFC within a specified EFC range	Identifies the most problematic FAFSA elements within a given EFC range
Field Range Report with Corrected Field Counts	Counts the number of fields corrected and the impact of those corrections on EFC within user-specified ranges of any single FAFSA data element	Identifies ranges of FAFSA values that should – and need not – be targeted for verification
Pell Corrected Records Report	The number of fields corrected and the impact of those corrections on initial Pell Awards within user-specified ranges of any single FAFSA data element	Identifies ranges of FAFSA values that should and should not be targeted for verification of Pell Grant recipients
Transaction Comparison	Side-by-side comparison of initial and paid on values of selected FAFSA data elements for each applicant who meets user-defined selection criteria	Provides a focused review of individual cases, for evaluating the applicability to individual students of any generalized patterns observed in other reports

TABLE 1
(CONTINUED)

Analytic Reports

<u>Report Title</u>	<u>Information</u>	<u>Relevance</u>
Custom Report	A case-by-case listing of any FAFSA field values the user selects	Allows examination of relationships not captured by other reports
List – EFC Change by Student	A listing of students who experienced a change in a given FAFSA item accompanied by the change in EFC; results can be sorted by EFC	Allows identification of the most problematic incidences of change to a particular FAFSA element
List – Verification Flags By Student	A listing of students accompanied by their CPS verification status, School Verification status, and characterization of change to EFC	Allows a side-by-side comparison of CPS and institutional verification practices
List – Verification Selection Criteria By Student	Lists students flagged by institutional verification and lists specific institutional verification profiles that apply	Indicates the reasons each individual verified student was verified; permits each individual profile component to be evaluated
List – Verification Selection Criteria by Code	Lists students to whom a specific verification profile applies	Allows the contribution of each verification profile to the overall verification system to be evaluated
Query Management	Printout of pre-defined and user-defined queries	Allows query specifications to be shared with and reviewed by others

Table 2 lists the **operational reports** available through the QA Tool for managing information, correcting technical problems, and sharing information across platforms.

TABLE 2	Operational Reports
	<u>Function Served</u>
Record Layout – Export Full	Prints the record layout for full data export. Could be used to facilitate additional analysis of QA Tool data within another software product (e.g. Excel, SAS, etc.)
Record Layout – Export UD	Prints a record layout for the User Database. Could be used to facilitate additional analysis of User Database data within another software product (e.g. Excel, SAS, etc.)
System Setup	Prints System setup information, including system and file management information. Will provide some of the information technical support personnel will need to provide accurate assistance.
User Database	Provides field names and values entered into the user database for each student. Could be used to facilitate sequential hand entering of additional user database information

4 – How the QA Schools Use the Tools

In the 2002 cycle, Quality Assurance Program schools will be expected to use the Tool to analyze their data.

SFA is eager to learn more about institutional verification processes in order to contribute to the proposed changes in the verification selection criteria. We will be asking QA schools to enter their verification parameters (not CPS) into the Tool using the verification edit profile, a new feature of the Tool. Schools that are not in the program will not have to supply these data – but are welcome and encouraged to use the Tool.²

Using a query-like interface indicating the cases typically subject to institutional verification, schools can set verification “flags” in the database by applying multiple logical conditions. Later this Spring, QA schools will share these parameters for program-wide analysis.

Throughout the Tool’s development, SFA has invited schools using the Tool to evaluate it. This will continue, with attention to **general usability**; the **automated institutional verification flag generator** that was added to this version of the Tool; and the **overall usefulness of the reports** – including suggestions for how to modify existing reports or craft new reports for future use. This feedback from users will be vital in our efforts to continue improving the Tool and to the guidance we will present on the Tools for Schools page of the Quality Assurance program Web site, online at <http://qaprogram.air.org/qatest/ToolForSchool.asp>.

² For more information about QA institutions, please see information about our partnerships with schools, online at <http://qaprogram.air.org/structure.asp>.

5 – Briefing and Training Materials

SFA Staff have developed briefing and training materials on the Quality Analysis (verification) Tool, including those prepared for the March 2002 First National Quality Assurance and Experimental Sites Conference. These materials can be found online at: <http://qaprogram.air.org/archive.asp>.

6 – Announcements on Key Topics

Updates for member schools, with announcements of key topics, can be found on the “What’s New” page of the Quality Assurance program Web site, online at: <http://qaprogram.air.org/whatsNew.asp>.

7 – Web Links of Note

A number of SFA Web pages offer resources related both to quality assurance and to the SFA mission of helping put America through school. Here are five:

The SFA portal link:

<http://sfa4schools.sfa.ed.gov/SFAPortal/home/index1.htm>.

The Quality Analysis Tool, the Installation Guide, the Desk Reference, and the Cover Letter can be downloaded from: <http://sfadownload.ed.gov>.

Quality Assurance Program “Tools for Schools” at: <http://qaprogram.air.org/ToolForSchool.asp>.

The U.S. Department of Education notice on the Tool is online at: www.ifap.ed.gov/eannouncements/0128QAToolVersion2.html.

Information about how to apply to the QA program is online at <http://qaprogram.air.org/structure.asp>.

A Typical Timeline

Effective Use of the Quality Analysis Tool

